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Field to Bag, Bag to Field: Feedbag Production and Distribution in Rural America

Heather. R. Buechler

sack- *noun*

a large bag made of a strong material such as burlap, thick paper, or plastic, used for storing and carrying goods.¹

A popular object among collectors of agricultural ephemera, the printed agricultural sack—both textile and paper—used for the distribution of agricultural goods, is an object with a rich history. Previous research published on these ephemeral objects has typically examined their use and reuse in American households as clothing, quilts, and other domestic goods, or their significance in the World War I Belgian War Relief under the Herbert Hoover administration. This paper poses approaches to the the feedbag as an object capable of providing various insights and provocations into the history of the print, manufacturing, textile, and paper industries. By examining the object's process of production and means of distribution, we can begin to excavate a lost narrative of rural American culture that highlights nuances in the shift from smaller localized systems of production and distribution to larger regional, and eventually national and international systems that have impacted both product packaging and goods being packaged. Within these shifts lies the potentiality of better understanding the relationship between rural America and the industries that have contributed to its vitality, and perhaps models that may have lead to a contemporary decline.

As a body of research in-progress, we will walk through a summary of existing research on the object, provide an overview of various roles the object has had in its history, and finally end by focusing primarily on its production as a design object—referencing material from the Hamilton Wood Type and Manufacturing Company, Bemis Bag Company, and S. George and Company, as well as various collections and material from but not limited to the Museum of History and Industry (MOHAI) in Seattle, WA and the GramLee Collection at West Virginia University in Morgantown, WV.

As an object that is tied to both manufacturing and rural culture, locating the particulars of the sack's past has proven challenging. The history of manufacturing and rural culture are not histories we have done well to take care of. Just as swiftly as technology progresses and new narratives are created, equally as swiftly do past narratives seem to become erased. But in their erasure exists the narratives of everyday farmers, workers, laborers, artisans, and companies that played an important role in shaping rural and urban culture today.

Imagine, if you will, a time without telephones, a time without railroads, a time without automobiles. Imagine a time when the land sprawled out before you in waves—the fields undulating planes of amber, ochre, and brown. This is the time of the agrarian, a time when farming defined our culture; immigrants worked the land, slaves worked the land, your neighbor worked the land. Farms dotted the banks of riverbeds, butted by lush tree growth flanked by

¹ "sack," *English Oxford Living Dictionaries.com*, accessed October 15, 2016, <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sack>.

sprawling prairies. Yes, there were cities, but they were far-away places, and merely represented a market.

In the early 1800's there were no railroads. An intricate system of rivers, lakes, and canals were the primary means by which products moved from the countryside to then-burgeoning metropolises. It is for this very reason you see the earliest of rural development occurring on the spines of these waterways. The same is true for early manufacturing plants; water provided much needed power and easy access to these fluid shipping routes.

The sack was tied specifically to this water-based method of shipping and trading. In fact, sacks were key players in their successful implementation.²

First and foremost, by providing a container to move a product.



Bemis Company Records, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle, Washington

Producers were small at this time and their product required a modest scale of handling. The process of moving the product required loading and unloading onto and off of flatboats, keelboats, steamboats, to pier, to levee, and eventually to their final destination, the sack also provided a (somewhat) manageable way to physically move product from place to place. Small groups of sacks were a logical solution.

Perhaps more important than acting as container the sack offered a way to tie the product back to its point of origin. As a trackable object, it created a system of quality assurance and

² William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago And The Great West*. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 108). Cronon explains that "[agricultural textile sacks] were the key to the whole water-based transportation system. ...Once embarked on the river passage, sacks offered a convenient solution to the problem of loading the irregular holds of flatboats, keelboats, and steamboats."

accountability between shipper and buyer the whole length of the journey.³ Rather, each sack was inextricably tied to one particular producer—one. This cannot be stressed enough.

At the advent of agricultural trade and shipping, grains were not mixed. Each clustering of sacks represented one farm and assured the recipient that the product purchased was of a certain quality and representative of that one producer's product. In terms of accountability, the producer, which was the farmer, was also considered the shipper. While storekeepers operated as a middleman between farmer and buyer, the farmer as producer and shipper assumed responsibility of the product from the moment it left the farm. Meaning if something happened to the product downstream, the farmer would incur that loss.



"Bemis A Seamless" coarse-weave bag, State Historical Museum of Iowa, Des Moines

Sacks at this time were relatively simplistic in design, demonstrative of their utilitarian nature. They are characterized by their heavier weaves and basic branding, which more often than not served to communicate the sack's manufacturer as opposed to the product contained. Thread counts were indicative of intended function (e.g. milled flour vs. threshed grain). Examples of such sacks are numerous, and can be found in various public and private collections across the country known for possessing a coarse weave with two red stripes on either side of a circular imprint often reading, "Grade A Seamless". Leo Landis, museum curator at the State Historical Society of Iowa, mentions these particular bags were sometimes marketed to farmers directly via catalogues like Montgomery Ward & Company to be used on the farm over and over again. Other bags typical of this time period are of burlap, most often used for shipping larger products like potatoes, onions, and other bulky produce.

³ Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis*, 109. "Beyond [the] purely physical problems of water-based grain handling, the prevailing apparatus for transferring ownership rights also worked in favor of the sack system. Shippers and their customers wanted to know exactly what they were selling and buying, so it made sense not to break up individual shipments or mix them with others. ...The water-based grain-marketing system at midcentury was thus design to move wheat, corn, and other cereal crops without disrupting the link between grain as physical object and grain as salable commodity."

At its advent, the sack wasn't designed for selling the products it moved—it operated only as a unit of measure; a means to move a product from field to market. This is precisely because of its function in the water-based shipping method. Railroads completely changed all of this.

The railroad created alternative ways to reach not only new land and new markets, but to reach them and existing markets with more expedience. Land previously inaccessible became accessible, with new routes to cities for both product and person. They lowered transportation costs, promoted urban growth, and consequently changed the way producers thought about the scale of their production. Railroads created a new unit of product measure. The sack was replaced by the carload.

Equally as important to the eradication of the sack (as we previously understood it being tied to a water-based shipping route that tied it to a single producer) was the invention of the steam-powered grain elevator. This storage facility created new ways to manage larger stores of product. These elevators popped up along river banks, rail lines, small towns and cities. However, their success hinged on one contingency: the product must be removed from the sack.

How then is the product quality accounted for? How do you handle disagreeable product in the mix with agreeable, even higher-grade product? One would have to nullify the product's ties to the original shipper/producer/farmer and create a regulation and grading system for all incoming products as a group. The Chicago Board of Trade, formed in 1848, stepped in to solve this very problem. The Chicago Board of Trade, along with the establishment of a futures market, over time and much trial and tribulation, created a system for grading various agricultural products moving into the cities at an increasingly higher and higher rate. The sack, operating in this new system, became rendered obsolete as a shipping container, but not obsolete in the market. Instead, we see the sack undergo a role change.

With the advent of the railroad, the grain elevator, the Chicago Board of Trade, and the futures market that the sack became more prominently identifiable as a product *package*—designed and produced to *sell* its contents (and yes, still move them to some effect)—as opposed to a product *container* used *only* for *movement*. These sacks, in contrast to the aforementioned Grade-A Seamless, would vary from 2-3 color stencils on burlap, to 3-5 color designs on fine woven cotton, paper bands over elaborately calico printed textiles, and eventually paper, plastic and other synthetics now ubiquitous in contemporary packaging culture.

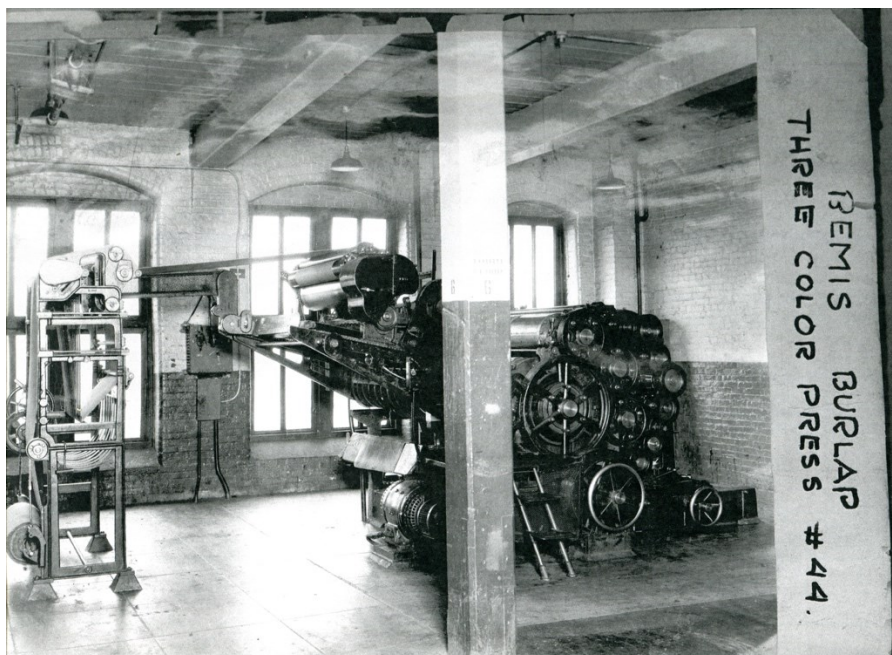
This shift in the sack's functionality allows for an investigation into the process of manufacturing the sack, specifically as a product package; a history of manufacturing intrinsically tied to the history of print production. Sacks heretofore will be discussed as "bags", given this became the common nomenclature of their manufacturers, e.g. "Bemis Bag Co.". Having already learned so much about rural development, at least in a general sense, from distribution patterns and role of the bag as container for a product, what could we learn if we more carefully inspect the flow of commerce between these bag manufacturers (and their supporting industries)?

Looking specifically at print production, two primary concerns are presented: the methods for creating designs and their method of (print) production. How was the image generated? How

were the images distributed? Who manufactured the image? What presses were used? Initially, these companies were investigated in an attempt to finding records of early small scale manufacturers who, much like smaller farms, were eventually absorbed by larger manufacturing companies. However, the procedure for this investigation has not been direct.

Much like to farms and other early industry, bag manufacturers popped up along major waterways. This was, again, out of a necessity for access to a power supply to run textile and paper mills, close proximity to a primarily rural client-base, and easy access to shipping routes. Typical bag manufacturing companies did everything in-house. A thorough examination of Bemis Bag Company⁴ records housed at the Museum of History and Industry (Seattle, WA) and The Gale Family Library at the Minnesota History Center (St. Paul, MN) quickly shows major bag manufacturers had departments for everything: milling, weaving, sewing, design, engraving, printing, ink-mixing, sewing, shipping, e&c.

Bemis' company publication, *Bemistory*, contains information on every department within the plant, and contains records of equipment used typical for almost every bag manufacturer of the time. Other large manufacturers operating at this time include Chase Bag Co. and Fulton Bag Co. All of these companies produced bags that exhibited remarkable design quality, a testament to the designers, engravers, and printers employed by the company.



Bemis Company Records, Museum of History and Industry, Seattle

Most sacks, after stenciling, were printed letterpress or on offset reroll presses from wood engravings and wood type, well into the early 1900's. This process is a relief print process, similar to block printing in textile production, and the presses, similar to if not also modified

⁴ Bemis Bag Company was a major bag manufacturer with multiple manufacturing plants spread across the United States, from Seattle to Minneapolis, and is still in operation today

calico presses and web presses⁵. This method of production was soon surpassed by stereotypes, which make use of rubber plates cast from composed type or an original image generated by a wood engraver⁶. Though the specifics of the process and time of turnover are still unclear.

This turns to the process of examining another ephemeral object: wood engravings manufactured for the print production of textile agricultural packaging. There are two prominent collections in the United States that contain both the original engravings, as well as many company documents related to their production and distribution.

The Hamilton Wood Type and Printing Museum in Two Rivers, WI is what was saved from Hamilton Manufacturing, one of the largest producers of wood type and wood products. It is an oasis to contemporary letterpress printers and historians alike. Similarly, the GramLee Collection in West Virginia is home to one of the largest collections of wood engravings—of exceptional quality—originally used by the S. George Company of Wellsburg, WV to print packaging for agricultural products marketed specifically to rural America. The collections, both being remarkable representations of their unique role in the production process. speak directly with one another, as the majority of blocks in the GramLee Collection bare the Hamilton imprint, indicating they were actually manufactured by Hamilton for S. George & Company



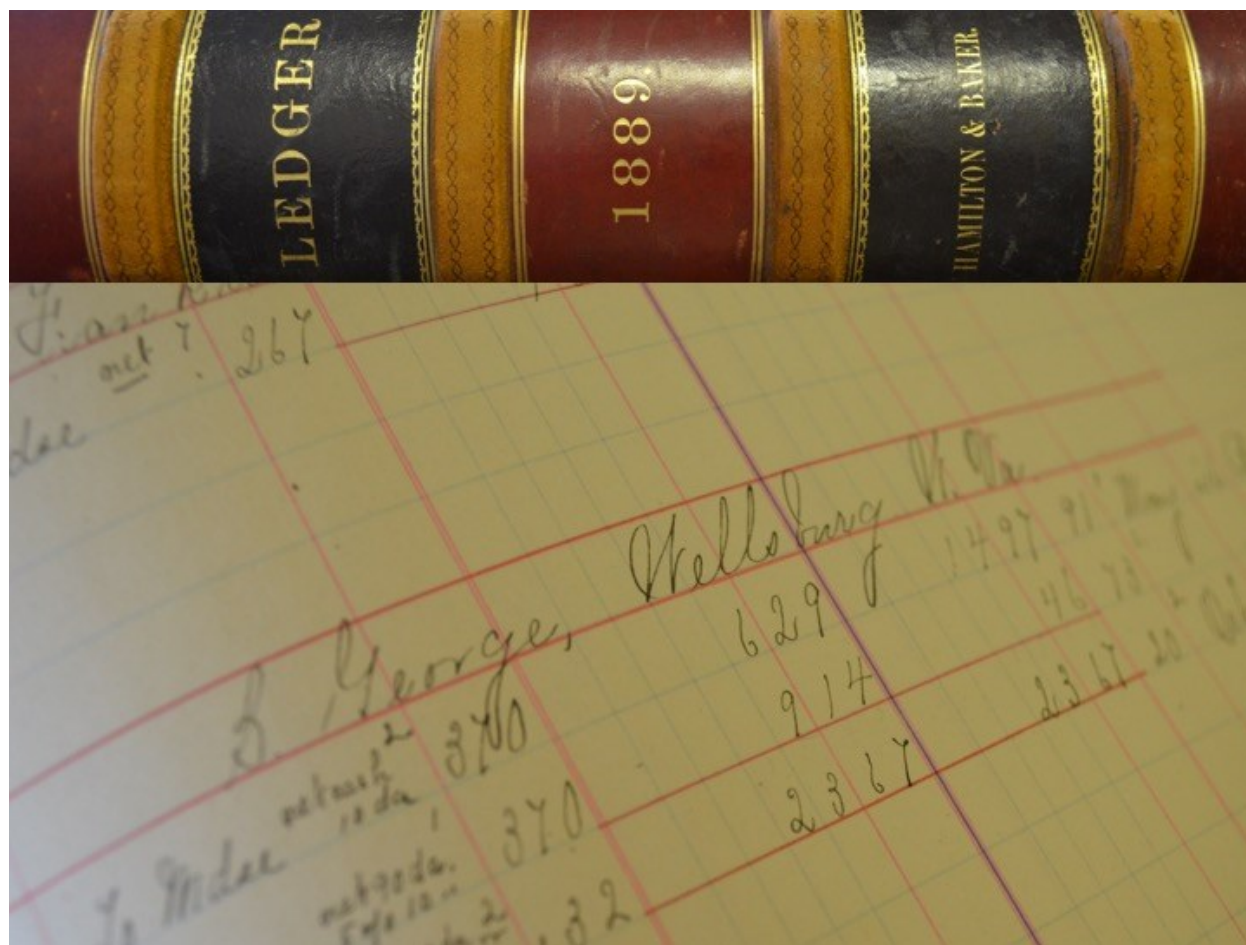
Hamilton Wood Type & Printing Museum, Two Rivers, WI

⁵ A web press is a type of offset press, wherein an inked image is transferred, or offset, onto a rubber blanket and then that is imprinted onto the substrate, which is fed through the press as a long ream of material. Most of the information available on web presses pertains to its use in printing newspapers or other paper-based items.

⁶ Rob Roy Kelly, *American Wood Type, 1828-1900: Notes On The Evolution Of Decorated And Large Types And Comments On Related Trades Of The Period*, (Saratoga, CA: Liber Apertus Press, 2010), 189. Kelly states that “bag companies required huge inventories of wood type in their business well into the first 20 or 30 years of the twentieth century. Because printing coarse bag fabrics directly from wood type reduced the life of the type substantially, late in the nineteenth century most companies would lock up the form of wood type and make a mat from which they cast a rubber plate to print from. The resilience of the rubber afforded a better imprint than would have been possible with either wood or metal. Many of the colorful flour and feed bags of several generations ago were printed in some part with wood type supplemented by the work of the wood engraver.”

In addition to the Hamilton Manufacturing imprint many of the blocks are also marked with corresponding numbers. These numbers refer to a larger catalogue of blocks from the S. George Company. Two known catalogues exist and are currently housed in the GramLee Collection at West Virginia University where Joseph Galbreth, Associate Professor of Graphic Design in the School of Art and Design, is currently digitizing given the incredibly fragile nature of catalogues. One catalogue is for stock, or generic, jobs, while the other is one for client, or custom, jobs. Confirmation that the numbers do act as an order call number has not successfully been confirmed, as much of the materials associated were never successfully archived.

However, a closer examination of these catalogues has the potential to shed light on an earlier query within this paper as to the dates of operation and distribution patterns of smaller bag manufacturers and printers, particularly in regards to any custom jobs. Though, the relationship between Hamilton Manufacturing and S. George Company would need to be clarified, in so much as knowing when the corresponding numbers were punched into the blocks. E.g. Were the numbers punched by S. George Company upon arrival at their warehouse, or before? In any case, could these numbers indicate who else was ordering the engravings?



Hamilton Manufacturing Company Archives, Hamilton Wood Type & Printing Museum, Two Rivers, WI

The Hamilton Ledgers from 1889 and 1892 confirm business transactions between these two manufacturers, but also reveal a now growing list of smaller bag manufacturers the Hamilton Manufacturing Company did business with. The particulars of these sales themselves though are unknown to us at this present day, as no itemized sales or transaction receipts seem to exist at in either of these collections. Maybe they do, but both collections, Hamilton in particular, remain in the process of archiving what material they do have. Even so, one could surmise that having the names of any other company would allow for another foray into other partial archives associated with their locality, and *potentially* offer more information into what they were purchasing from the Hamilton Manufacturing Company or S. George Company.

At the very least, by examining the Hamilton company ledgers, more bag companies *have* been identified, and while their date of demise is currently unknown, there is documented evidence of their existence, and were doing business with the Hamilton Manufacturing Company potentially in the same fashion as their larger counterparts, such as S. George Company.

A common pattern repeated time and time again in rural America is the growth and falling out of industry. The early 1800's were a time of great growth, and this growth is tied to all of the technological innovations that allowed production—across the board—to swell. However, it comes at the cost of consolidation in many cases. Small farms bought and sold and turned into large mega-farms, small manufacturers bought out and absorbed by larger regional corporations, have all resulted in the decentralizing of systems of production and their corresponding economies—dramatically impacting the communities they once supported.

As part of a past motivated by progress, innovation, and change, the need for keeping track of these internal changes in use, production, and distribution in any sort of organized archival fashion remained up to an individual companies' discretion. If that company dissolved, so often did their records. The open-ended queries surrounding feedbag production and distribution presented in this paper are reflective of the multitude of cultural, historical, and social narratives that continue to be, if not more, ephemeral than the object itself.

Now imagine the drastic changes our land has undergone and imagine the intricate infrastructure needed to keep every strip mall humming. With the decentralization of the family farm, and the family business, rural industry has seemingly all but dried up, leaving our small towns feeling forgotten as they live in the shadow of a time we have forgotten. They have not forgot, and we should not forget. We have outgrown our family farms and the implications of that can no longer be contained.

It is why excavating each lost thread is imperative if we want to understand how to rebuild and reconcile.

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